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Recommended Citation

Harwood, Richard, "Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993): News Article 61" (1993). *Hackney, Sheldon: Humanities Chairman Nomination Hearing (1993)*. Paper 83.
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Richard Harwood

Thought Police In America

In "Albion's Seed," his great history of the colonization of America, David Hackett Fischer describes some of the penalties for politically incorrect speech in Puritan Massachusetts in the 17th century:

"Quakers . . . were punished with special ferocity. Some were branded in the face and 'burned very deep with a red-hot iron with H. for heresie.' Others had their ears cut off, faces scarred and nostrils slit open in a saturnalia of sadistic punishment. . . . Four Quaker women were ordered to be stripped to the waist, tied to a cart's tail and conveyed 'from constable to constable,' through twelve New England towns, and to be whipped in every town. The women were flogged so terribly that the blood coursed down their naked backs and breasts, until the horrified townsmen of Salisbury rose against the constables and rescued them."

In Boston in 1637, a synod of the clergy listed 82 forbidden opinions that were to be rooted out as blasphemous, erroneous and unsafe. Between 1656 and 1662, a purge of heretics took place. Four were hanged, many others were subjected to maiming and mutilation and others were banished from the colony. In 1691 and 1692, witchcraft trials conducted by a special commission that convicted 32 men and women. All were hanged except one "witch," who was crushed to death under heavy weights.

American history is full of efforts to eradicate dissent and dissenters, to suppress unpopular opinions, to muzzle "incorrect" speech. Both laws and vigilante committees were used to impose political orthodoxy on newspaper printers during and after the Revolutionary War. The army was sent out during the Civil War to smash printing equipment and shut down "copperhead" newspapers.

Mobs sacked many newspapers and murdered or assaulted many editors over the years who dared to challenge, mock or repudiate conventional wisdom. The Record in Marion County, Kan., reported in 1876 the acquittal of a man who had murdered an editor: "That's just the way of some juries—they think it no more harm to shoot an editor than a Jack-rabbit."

Prosecutors and police tracked down and imprisoned pacifists and Socialists during and after World War I. The modern witch hunts of the McCarthy era are fresh in my memory. Which books, magazines and newspapers did you read? Which ideas did you express? Who were your friends and enemies? Young civil rights workers were murdered in the South in the 1960s because of the words they spoke: End segregation.

We have entered a new period of repressive orthodoxy and conformity. Codes on "word crimes" have been promulgated by at least 300 universities and colleges across the land, creating an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty over the "acceptability" of words, attitudes and opinions. People are not murdered or mutilated. But their careers and reputations can be put at risk by the words they write or speak.

At the University of Michigan the faculty is warned against "discriminatory" utterances "based on race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, ancestry, age, marital status, handicap or Vietnam-era status that has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment for academic pursuits, employment, housing, or participation in a university activity."

Under this comprehensive edict, is it now a speech crime at Ann Arbor and other schools to refer to the president as a "draft evader" or to refer to Davidians as "fanatics"? Are those words "intimidating" or "offensive" under the correctness codes? Do the "South Pacific" lyrics—"she is broad where a broad should be broad"—represent "sexist" speech that should be prohibited, as some have suggested?

A respected scholar and dean at Washington College, where I lecture from time to time, was vocally assaulted recently by a leader of a gay men's and lesbian alliance who accused him of being "a bigot, a Nazi, a person like those who persecute Jews; [you are] garbage, lower than garbage . . . unfit [for the job of dean] and a disgrace to this college."

The "word crime" committed by the dean was to speak in opposition to a "domestic partners" proposal that had financial implications for a college operating in the red. The alliance demanded that he be formally censured by the college and forced to recant. These demands were rejected. Nevertheless, as the dean noted, the mere charge that he is "homophobic" is itself "career threatening" in today's academic climate.

A Jewish student at the University of Pennsylvania is facing trial for yelling "water buffalos" at a noisy crowd of black students who were partying outside his dormitory window, disturbing his sleep. The words he used are considered by his accusers to constitute a "racial epithet," although etymologists have discovered no historical or contemporary usage in that context.

At the same university, another group of blacks effectively censored an edition of the student newspaper by seizing 14,000 copies—practically the entire press run—and dumping them into trash bins. This was an effort to muzzle the writings of a right-wing student columnist.

In this new era of orthodoxy, the press plays a variety of roles. It now and then reminds us—as a handful of papers did in the McCarthy era—of the protections for free expression Americans are supposed to enjoy under the First Amendment and of the social and political values it is intended to protect. It also acts as something of an "enforcer" of orthodox speech and doctrine by ferreting out and punishing with publicity people guilty of speech regarded as sexist, racist, antisemitic or otherwise offensive to one group or another. The politician who tells a sexist joke at the Elks Club is likely to wind up on the front page and the evening news.

Newspapers themselves are finding it difficult to resist internal and external pressures to conform to various orthodoxies and agendas. Nat Hentoff of the Village Voice has described how his column has been edited without his knowledge or consent to avoid "offending" any of the paper's various constituencies. Howard Kurtz of The Post has published a new book in which he describes the modern newspaper as a "house divided" along lines of race, gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The inevitable result of such a polarized atmosphere is for everyone concerned to tiptoe around explosive subjects, hoping to avoid stepping on . . . a land mine. . . . That is a surefire prescription for more of the bland mush that plagues so many editorial pages."